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ABSTRACT

Trends in college participation are examined as evidence of how the nation is doing in improving educational opportunity. Attention is directed to changes in the college participation rates of dependent and independent students, blacks and whites, males and females, and different income groups between 1969 and 1981. Influences, such as college costs and personal attitudes, are briefly addressed. Data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey were used. Findings include the following: participation rates for the lowest income groups were down most sharply among black dependent students; participation rates of independent students have increased since 1969 for all groups except males (who show a decline); participation rates of women have been increasing during this period; and participation rates for low income blacks were down, while rates for independent black students were up sharply. It is suggested that financial aid for the most needy students should be increased, particularly to correct for the effect of inflation. Competing requests for funds for middle income and academically talented students should be weighed against the national commitment to reduce financial barriers for the most needy. (SW)

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AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EDUCATION Policy Brief

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# Rates of College Participation 1969, 1974, and 1981*

A major objective of colleges, of states, and of the federal government since the 1960s has been to increase educational opportunity by reducing financial barriers to college attendance for low-income students. This report examines trends in college participation as evidence of how the nation is doing in improving educational opportunity.

Participation rates—i.e., the percentage of college-eligible 18-to-24-year-olds who are attending institutions of higher education—are compared over time and for different population subgroups. All comparisons by income level have been adjusted to reflect 1981 dollars. Although overall rates of college participation remained fairly constant over the years considered, there were significant variations among population subgroups. Major results include:

- Total participation rates for 18-to-24-year-olds were slightly lower in 1981 than they were in 1969. In 1981, 33 percent of the 18-to-24-year-old population attended college. The rate was 35 percent in 1969.
- The difference in participation rates from 1969 to 1981 was similar for low-, middle-, and high-income groups.
- Male participation rates dropped sharply (11 percent) over the period while female participation rates increased somewhat (5 percent). Despite this trend, males are still more likely to go to college than are females.
- College participation rates of dependent students have dropped 6 percent while those of independent students (who rely on their own financial resources) have increased 3 percent.
- Participation rates for blacks increased by 1 percent over the decade while those of whites declined by 2 percent.
- The proportion of the population attending college part-time increased slightly (1.5 percent) while that of full-time students declined (3 percent).

## Factors Which Influence College Participation

This report describes changes in the college participation rates of dependent and independent students, blacks and whites, males and females, and different income groups between the years 1969 and 1981. In interpreting these data, the reader should be aware that a number of factors—including the cost of attendance, personal attitudes and values and specific situational conditions—are thought to influence these rates and to influence various subpopulations differently.

In addition to the direct costs faced by the student for tuition, fees, etc., the cost of attendance may also be described in terms of foregone income and expected returns from education. Federal policy has focused on reducing the direct costs of education by making financial aid available to some classes of students. The assumption is that, by reducing the direct cost of attendance, financial aid increases the probability that the recipient will attend college or attend a more expensive college than he or she otherwise could attend.

The propensity to attend college is also influenced by attitudes and values. These are shaped by social class, parents' education, peer pressure and community values. Specific conditions which influence the likelihood of enrollment include the presence of military draft deferments, the geographic availability of a college, changing admissions standards, and the general state of the economy.

During the 1970s there were changes in all of these factors. It was a decade in which federal and state student aid programs grew and inflation reached historically high levels. There were recessions, and changes in job opportunities for college graduates. The emphasis on civil rights and economic equity prevalent early in the 1970s has declined since then. There has been a shift in women's economic roles in the decade. The military draft came to an end in 1973. High school graduation requirements changed as did college entrance requirements.

These cross-currents of factors and shifting participation rates make it difficult to develop a simple measure of equity. This complexity also makes it difficult to isolate the effect of any single influence on educational opportunity. Because the cost of college has traditionally been considered a barrier to college participation, increased availability of financial assistance (the central federal strategy for improving

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access) has been presumed to be a key factor affecting college participation. Yet, it is difficult to evaluate student aid's role in improving equity because it has not been a single constant program but has shifted and evolved over the decade. Originally, the majority of funds were provided to low-income students. Two developments have modified this original commitment. The first was the increased use of loans in the late 1970s, in part to subsidize middle-income students. The second was rapid inflation, which eroded the value of maximum awards in the grant programs. The lowest income students eligible for the largest grants suffered the most. The combination of these two factors reduced the available aid for low-income students through the decade, even though federal appropriations for student aid increased.

All of these factors, and probably others, interact and influence college participation rates. Undoubtedly, they do not influence subpopulations in identical ways. For example, participation rates for males dropped during this decade, as those for women increased. Rates for dependent students declined while those for independent students increased.

## Defining College Participation

Data from the October reports of the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) for 1969, 1974, and 1981 were used to determine college participation rates. The rate is expressed by the following equation:

$$\text{college participation rate} = \frac{\text{individuals attending college}}{\text{college-eligible population}}$$

Individuals attending college were either full-time or part-time students. Enrollments in proprietary, vocational, or in any other training programs are not included.

The college-eligible population includes those individuals who had graduated from high school, were between the ages of 18 and 24, were civilians, were not institutionalized, nor had completed a Bachelor's degree.

Notably, participation rates can be influenced by changes in either the numerator or denominator. For example, the participation rate in 1969 for men was influenced both in the numerator and in the denominator by the Vietnam War. The increased number of men in uniform decreased the size of the civilian population, even as draft deferments for college attendance encouraged more men to attend and remain in school. The overall effect was an increase in the ratio of college attendees to college-eligible persons.

The years selected for study (1969, 1974, 1981) were chosen to capture the factors most affecting changes in the participation rates. The level of available federal financial aid over the decade as well as the effects of the Vietnam War were of particular concern. In fact 1969 had one of the highest participation rates and 1974 had one of the lowest in recent history.

Dependents in this study are those individuals reported to the Census Bureau as a dependent child in a family. All others—including those married, or household boarders, including relatives other than spouses—are considered independent students. These definitions are not the definitions used for student aid programs.

Income levels have been adjusted for the effect of inflation. All income figures are stated in 1981 dollars. Because the CPS reports income based on a single question, the figures are likely to understate the actual income, especially for higher income groups who have more diverse sources of income.

## Overall Participation Rates

College-going rates demonstrate shifting patterns over the three years 1969, 1974 and 1981. The most notable finding is that rates were lower in 1974 than in either 1969 or 1981. Four subgroups experienced a gain in participation rates since 1969: women, independent students, black students, and part-time students. Groups showing declining participation rates include men, dependent students, whites, and full-time students.

There are differences among groups over time. Males showed a sharp decline (11 percent) between 1969 and 1974, with a leveling off thereafter. Females, on the other hand, showed their gain (5 percent) in the later period. Dependent students showed their largest loss between 1969 and 1974. This was a period of increase for independent students, however. White participation rates have been relatively steady through all three time periods, with a slight increase in 1981.

Table 1 displays participation rates for different subgroups, with rates presented separately for head count, full-time, and part-time enrollment. Other data, shown in Tables 2 and 3, are expressed in terms of head count. All figures are limited to 18-to-24-year-olds.

## Dependent and Independent Students

Dependent students, 18-to-24 years of age, make up the core of the traditional college population. Their participation rate has dropped from 52 percent of those eligible in 1969 to 46 percent in 1981. There has been a roughly equal decline for all three income groups through the time period. The two highest income groups show a slight rebound from the low point of 1974. The participation rate for the lowest income group remained at the same level in 1981 (Table 2). Participation rates for independent students increased 3 percent between 1969 and 1981. Nearly 16 percent of the eligible independent individuals went to college in 1981. It is not useful to compare participation rates of independent students to those of dependent students by income: financially independent individuals who opt for school rather than work are less likely to work full-time and thus have a lower income than their counterparts in the work force.

Most of the increase in participation rates for independent individuals came between 1969 and 1974. The period of decline in participation rates for dependent students came between 1969 and 1974, with a slight increase since 1974.

## Participation Rates by Race

Overall, participation rates for whites fell between 1969 and 1981, from 36 percent to 33 percent. During this same period, black participation rates increased by 1 percent from 27 percent to 28 percent.

When the two racial groups are divided into dependent and independent categories, some striking differences

**Table 1**
College Participation Rates for Population 18–24
(Percentage of Eligible Population)

| | 1969 | 1974 | 1981 | 1969–1981 Diff |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| All Students | | | | |
| Head Count | 34.9% | 30.8% | 33.1% | −1.7% |
| Full-time | 31.2 | 26.4 | 28.0 | −3.2 |
| Part-time | 3.7 | 4.5 | 5.2 | +1.5 |
| White Students | | | | |
| Head Count | 35.6 | 30.8 | 33.4 | −2.2 |
| Full-time | 31.8 | 26.3 | 28.2 | −3.6 |
| Part-time | 3.8 | 4.5 | 5.2 | +1.4 |
| Black Students | | | | |
| Head Count | 26.9 | 26.9 | 27.8 | +0.8 |
| Full-time | 24.1 | 23.2 | 23.7 | −0.4 |
| Part-time | 2.9 | 3.7 | 4.0 | +1.2 |
| All Male Students | | | | |
| Head Count | 45.5 | 34.9 | 34.8 | −10.7 |
| Full-time | 41.3 | 30.2 | 29.9 | −11.4 |
| Part-time | 4.2 | 4.8 | 4.9 | +0.8 |
| All Female Students | | | | |
| Head Count | 26.6 | 27.2 | 31.7 | +5.0 |
| Full-time | 23.3 | 23.0 | 26.3 | +3.0 |
| Part-time | 3.3 | 4.2 | 5.3 | +2.1 |
| All Dependent Students | | | | |
| Head Count | 51.9 | 45.6 | 45.9 | −6.1 |
| Full-time | 48.8 | 41.3 | 41.0 | −7.8 |
| Part-time | 3.2 | 4.4 | 4.9 | +1.8 |
| All Independent Students | | | | |
| Head Count | 12.7 | 15.0 | 15.9 | +3.2 |
| Full-time | 8.4 | 10.4 | 10.4 | +2.0 |
| Part-time | 4.4 | 4.6 | 5.5 | +1.1 |

emerge. Black and white dependent individuals show a decline in participation between 1969 and 1981, a loss of 6 percent for whites and a loss of 5 percent for blacks. Proportionally, the decline is about the same for both groups—approximately a 12 percent decline for each (Table 2).

Black participation rates dropped sharply for those with under-$12,000 family income. Declines among white dependent students are much more evenly distributed among the income groups. The very lowest income whites show the smallest decline.

The participation rates of independent students increased among both racial groups, but most markedly for black independents (Table 2). Black independent students doubled their participation rates (from 7 percent to 15 percent) while independent white participation increased from 13 percent to 16 percent. The sharp increase in the participation rates of black independent students offsets the decline in black dependent rates so that, overall, black individuals show a slight increase in participation rates. The increase in white independents' participation rates was not as great and, even though it offset some of the decline in white dependent participation rates, it did not overcome it.

## Males and Females by Income

Male participation rates dropped sharply between 1969 and 1981 while female participation rates increased. The male rate dropped most sharply between 1969 and 1974 with a continuing, but lesser, decline until 1981. The rate of decline for dependent males was similar throughout the income distribution (Table 3).

Female participation rates increased for both dependent and independent categories. The increase was strongest for females from families with income over $25,000. The lowest income group showed little change over the time period.

Independent females showed a strong increase in participation rates although they continued to lag, to a significant degree, behind the male rates. Dependent women's participation rates lagged behind males in 1969 but exceeded them in 1981. Dependent female participation rates exceeded that of males in all reported income categories in 1981.

## Discussion of Results

The evidence indicating how well our nation is doing in improving educational opportunity is mixed. Some target populations are doing better while others are doing worse. Even though overall participation rates are slightly down from 1969, they have rebounded somewhat from the even lower levels of 1974.

The mixed character of the changes is evident when groups are analyzed in detail. Participation rates for the lowest income groups are down most sharply among black dependent students. The pattern for men is that the declines have taken place among all income groups. Overall, the gap between the very richest and the very poorest has changed very little since 1969.

It is useful to recognize that the participation rates of independent students have increased since 1969 for all groups except males (who show a decline). This may indicate an improvement in equity because independent students cannot draw on family resources as readily as dependent students if they want to go to school. Independent students are more likely to have to replace lost income if they are to go to college. Availability of financial assistance may be more important to independent students than dependent students.

The results do not provide any proof as to what may have caused the changes in participation rates. Yet, because the overall decline is due, in large part, to the drop in male participation rates between 1969 and 1974, the end of the draft probably was an important factor in changing male participation rates.

Participation rates of women were increasing throughout the period. This has been a period of increasing opportunities for women. New job opportunities have opened up for women that have not historically been available to them. This may have improved the perceived returns from education for women over historical expectations.

Changes for black dependent students are more difficult to understand. Rates for low income blacks are down, suppressing the total participation rate for black dependent students. At the same time, participation rates for independent black students are up sharply. Several suggestions have been made which could be considered in providing an explanation:

- Inflation reduced the purchasing power of low-income families more severely than that of any other group. Be-

**Table 2**
Participation Rates for Independent Students and Dependent Students by Race and Income

| Income-Category | 1969 | 1974 | 1981 | 1969–1981 Diff. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Independent Students | | | | |
| Total | 12.7% | 15.0% | 15.9% | +3.2% |
| Black | 7.5 | 12.3 | 15.3 | +7.8 |
| White | 13.1 | 14.8 | 15.6 | +2.6 |
| Dependent Students | | | | |
| $0 –11,999 | 39.2% | 33.0% | 33.0% | –6.2% |
| $12,000–24,999 | 46.6 | 38.5 | 40.3 | –6.3 |
| $25,000 or more | 60.8 | 52.6 | 54.4 | –6.4 |
| Total | 51.9 | 45.5 | 45.8 | –6.1 |
| Black Dependent Students | | | | |
| $0 –11,999 | 38.9% | 37.6% | 26.7% | –12.2% |
| $12,000–24,999 | 38.6 | 36.7 | 40.2 | +1.6 |
| $25,000 or more | 44.9 | 43.2* | 44.1 | –0.8 |
| Total | 38.3 | 37.3 | 33.7 | –4.6 |
| White Dependent Students | | | | |
| $0 –11,999 | 38.9% | 29.0% | 36.4% | –2.5% |
| $12,000–24,999 | 42.7 | 39.6 | 39.3 | –3.4 |
| $25,000 or more | 61.9 | 52.9 | 54.8 | –7.1 |
| Total | 53.6 | 46.2 | 47.5 | –6.1 |

*Sample size is inadequate for valid comparisons.

**Table 3**
Participation Rates for Males and Females

| Income-Category | 1969 | 1974 | 1981 | 1969–1981 Diff. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Males | | | | |
| $0 –11,999 | 42.8% | 34.0% | 29.7% | –13.1% |
| $12,000–24,999 | 52.1 | 37.0 | 37.5 | –14.6 |
| $25,000 or more | 67.5 | 51.9 | 51.1 | –16.4 |
| Total Dependent | 58.0 | 45.1 | 43.4 | –14.6 |
| Total Independent | 21.8 | 20.2 | 19.5 | –2.3 |
| Females | | | | |
| $0 –11,999 | 35.6% | 32.1% | 36.1% | +0.5% |
| $12,000–24,999 | 41.2 | 40.4 | 43.2 | +2.0 |
| $25,000 or more | 53.5 | 53.6 | 58.4 | +4.9 |
| Total Dependent | 45.7 | 46.3 | 48.7 | +3.0 |
| Total Independent | 7.9 | 11.5 | 13.5 | +5.6 |

cause a large proportion of blacks are of low-income, inflation has had an inordinate negative effect on their ability to send children to college.

- Student financial assistance for low-income students has not kept pace with increases in college costs. A large number of black students depend on this aid.
- The activist civil rights era has passed, reducing the immediate pressure for providing special services for low-income blacks.
- Blacks are increasing as a portion of the age group, thus, enrollments can remain the same while rates of participation drop due to the larger base.

Some of these propositions argue against the increase in the participation rates of independent black students who, one assumes, are dependent on the availability of adequate student aid to finance their attendance.

The general decline in participation rates is, in part, explainable by the combination of inflation and unemployment. There is perhaps a diminished faith in the belief that college is a good avenue for getting out of poverty.

In this writer's judgment, the results of this analysis suggest that financial aid provided for the most needy in this society should be increased, particularly to correct for the erosion caused by inflation over the years. Maximum grant awards could be increased to compensate for the increased cost of college attendance. Competing requests for funds to ease the cost of college for middle income families and providing funds for the most academically talented should be weighed against the national commitment to reduce financial barriers for the most needy. Over the last few years, national statistics suggest that we have been moving away from the goal of college access for the lowest income population.

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